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Backgrounder

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Another 50 Years of Mass Mexican Immigration

Mexican Government Report Projects Continued Flow Regardless of Economics or Birth Rates

By David Simcox

Mexico's National Population Council (CONAPO), an arm of the powerful Ministry of the Interior, issued a report in November 2001 on migration to the United States through 2030. Among its findings:

- Contrary to previous assurances, the Mexican government acknowledges in this report that falling birth rates and increased economic development in Mexico will *not* lead to a reduction in immigration to the United States for at least three decades.
- The Mexican government projects that mass immigration to the United States will continue at between 3.5 and 5 million people per decade until at least 2030.
- Even assuming strong economic growth and declining birth rates in Mexico, and weak demand for workers in the United States, immigration in 30 years is still projected to be nearly 400,000 people a year.
- Immigration will cause the Mexican-born population in the U.S. to at least double by 2030, reaching 16 to 18 million regardless of economic conditions in Mexico.
- Although the Mexican government report calls migration flows "inevitable," the report itself offers no evidence to support this.
- The report also does not estimate the additional immigration that would be stimulated by a new guestworker program. In the past, guestworker programs with Mexico have always generated more immigration.

In Good Times or Bad, More Emigration

The CONAPO report, *La Migracion Mexico-Estados Unidos*, finds that the rapid annual growth in the number of job seekers in Mexico, nearly 3 percent annually in the late 1990s, is leveling off and will fall below 1.0 percent yearly by 2025. In actual numbers, the 1.3 million new entrants yearly to the labor force in 1995 will decline to 1.0 million yearly by 2010 and to 500,000 a year in 2025, to zero growth by 2040, according to Mexican estimates.

Even as the growth of Mexico's economically active population slows markedly, Mexico's chronic underemployment, the lure of higher wages in the United States, and existing social networks will continue to drive emigration to the United States of 400,000 to 515,000 a year through 2030, when CONAPO's projection stops. Current legal Mexican emigration to the United States is about 175,000 a year, suggesting an annual illegal emigration of 200,000 to 300,000 for at least three more decades.

CONAPO posits five scenarios of future Mexican emigration to the United States in its 2001 publication. Emigration estimates comprise both legal and illegal immigrants, without distinction Each scenario is based on a different set of assumptions about these variables:

1) Future economic growth rates in Mexico and the United States;

2) Average wage ratios between Mexico and the United States;

3) Comparative rates of unemployment in the two countries; and

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4) Average per capita remittances by Mexican workers from the United States.

Under CONAPO's two most favorable scenarios for Mexico's economy and U.S.-Mexican wage ratios (Columns A and C in Table 1), annual emigration in 2030 will still approach 400,000 a year, 8.3 percent to 11.4 percent higher than the roughly 370,000 estimated for 2000. Only in the most favorable scenario of all (Column A), which posits economic growth averaging 4 percent, low unemployment in Mexico, a significantly lower gap between U.S. and Mexican wages, and no change in per capita remittances, does the upward curve of annual growth of the emigration flatten and turn downward in the projections before 2030.

The less favorable scenarios (Columns B and D) suppose a grimmer Mexican economic performance, continued high demand for workers in the United States, and a bleaker outcome by 2030:

- Thirty years of average GNP growth of 1.5 percent;
- A near tripling of the Mexico-U.S. wage gap by 2030;
- U.S. unemployment staying in the low 5-percent range, while Mexico's rises to 8 percent.

Such conditions would raise annual emigration in 2030 to 503,000 a year if average remittances are unchanged, or 514,000 if remittances go up. (While CONAPO does not explain its use of per capita remittances as a variable, that figure appears to be a valid indicator of Mexicans' real wages in the United States and amount of discretionary income.)

The fifth scenario (Column X) is a straight-line projection of economic and demographic conditions prevailing in 1996. It shows annual emigration to the United States 17.8 percent higher in 2030 than in 2000, rising to 435,000 a year.

All five scenarios in both Tables 1 and 2 show high and, in most cases, markedly rising emigration for at least the next 30 years. Mexico City here is facing the facts as rarely before: these projections are 25 percent to 35 percent higher than the earlier projections

Table 1. Five Scenarios: Annual Mexican Emigration to the U.S., 1996-2030 (Thou.)

Year	A Highest Growth/ Lowest Demand	B Low Growth/ High Demand	C High Growth/ Low Demand	D Lowest Growth/ Highest Demand	X Constant Emigration
1996	346.1	346.1	346.1	346.1	346.1
2000	365.8	375.5	369.2	378.8	369.2
2005	380.8	405.5	388.0	412.0	389.1
2010	389.8	430.4	399.9	439.1	403.5
2015	398.6	456.5	411.1	466.6	418.6
2030	396.6	503.4	412.8	514.3	435.0
% Change 2000-2030	8.4	34.1	11.8	35.8	17.8

Columns A and C assume: 1) 5 percent GNP growth from 1997 to 2015, falling to 3 percent in 2030; 2) decline in U.S.-Mexican wage ratio from 4.87:1.0 in 1996 to 1:1 in 2030; 3) Mexico's open unemployment falls from 5.5 percent in 1996 to 2.6 percent in 2030; 4) U.S. unemployment rises from 5.4 percent in 1996 to 9.7 percent in 2030. Column A assumes remittances per Mexican worker ($586) in 1996 remain constant. Column C assumes an increase to $970 (in 1996 dollars) during the period.

Columns B and D assume: 1) GNP growth falls from 5.1 percent in 1996 to 1.5 percent in 2000 and remains at that level until 2030; 2) U.S.-Mexican wage ratio widens from 4.87:1 in 1996 to 10.3:1 in 2015 and to 14.6:1 in 2030; 3) Mexico's open unemployment rises from 5.5 percent in 1996 to 8.0 percent in 2030; 4) U.S. unemployment falls from 5.4 percent to 4.9 percent between 1996 and 2030. Column B assumes constant remittances per capita while Column D assumes an increase to $970.

Source: CONAPO: *La Migracion Mexico-Estados Unidos 2001.*

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of CONAPO and the Census Bureau, both of which probably then knew better (Table 3, page 4).

Persistent Growth of the Future Mexican-Born Population in the U.S.

Some of CONAPO's numbers about the United States are based on Census findings, though not always the latest. The study gives the U.S. population at the start of 2002 as 279.1 million, more than 2 million below the latest Census adjusted figure of 281.4 million for 2000. Its claims "nearly 23 million" persons of Mexican origin in the United States, compared to Census' estimate of 21.6 million, noting that even 23 million may be low, as "six million Hispanics did not specify their origins during the 2000 census." CONAPO's estimate of 8.2 million Mexican-born residents in the United States falls below the most recent Census' estimates (C2SS, 2001) of 8.8 million. CONAPO further estimates the Mexican-born undocumented population in the United States in 2000 at 3.0 million — significantly lower than the 3.7 million illegal Mexican aliens estimated by Census. It is not clear whether these difference are matters of counting or of definition.

The outflow over the next three decades foreseen by CONAPO will hugely increase the pool of Mexicans (and their U.S.-born children) residing in the United States. CONAPO projects the future Mexican-born population using the same five scenarios it uses in estimating emigrant numbers. The two most favorable economic scenarios (A and C) would almost double the number of Mexican-born residents of the United States from 8.2 million in 2000 to 16.3 million or more by 2030 (Table 2). The two sets of grimmer assumptions (B and D) yield an estimated 18 million or more Mexican-born residents by 2030, in a projected Mexican-origin population of more than 42 million.[2]

What is striking about these projections is that the difference in outcomes between the worst and best scenarios is not extreme. All show continued high migration through thick and thin, underscoring the formidable degree to which emigration from Mexico has become institutionalized and less sensitive to economic shifts in the sending and receiving countries. In an earlier study, CONAPO acknowledged the perdurability of migration to the north:

> *The narrow range in which these situations vary indicate that other factors closely related to the migration tradition of more than 100 years and the operation of complex social network are apparently more determinative of international emigration than the impact of economic fluctuations in the labor markets of both countries.*[3]

This statement is a remarkable departure from what has been the conventional public political wisdom of Mexican leaders for half a century. They have consistently met expression of concern by the United States or prospects of U.S. action to curb the illegal

Table 2. Mexican-Born Population Residing in the United States, 1996-2030 (Millions)

Year	A Highest Growth/ Lowest Demand	B Low Growth/ High Demand	C HighGrowth/ Low Demand	D Lowest Growth/ Highest Demand	X Constant Immigration
1996	7.03	7.03	7.03	7.03	7.03
2000	8.17	8.19	8.17	8.19	8.17
2005	9.62	9.72	9.65	9.75	9.65
2010	11.06	11.32	11.14	11.39	11.15
2015	12.48	12.97	12.61	13.08	12.65
2030	16.32	17.95	16.65	18.20	16.89
% Change 2000-2030	132.20	155.30	136.80	158.90	140.30

Source: CONAPO: *La Migracion Mexico-Estados Unidos 2001;* same assumptions as Table 1.

The "constant immigration" (X) assumption projects a Mexican-born population in the United States of 16.9 million in 2030, which is not far from the optimistic scenarios (A and C). According to CONAPO's report, 68 percent of the Mexican-origin population of nearly 23 million now in the United States represents either immigrants (37 percent) or children of immigrants (31 percent).

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flow with the argument that the answer was the creation of enough jobs in Mexico, which was just a matter of time.

CONAPO Abandons Low Migration Projections — Census Stands Pat

Also remarkable is the far greater volume of emigration foreseen in the CONAPO document than its own previous projections in 1996 or those of the U.S. Census Bureau's International Population Center that were updated as recently as May 2000. (Table 3) The earlier projections suggest an institutional hesitance to acknowledge the real magnitude of the flight from Mexico in the past 20 years. In 1996, CONAPO projected emigration from 2000 to 2030 as 25 percent to 35 percent lower than its latest report. (see Table 3). Census' own estimates of Mexican emigration, which so far remain unchanged from 2000, also project migration a quarter or more lower than CONAPO now acknowledges.

The cause of this conservative bias at both Census and CONAPO may be political as well as demographic. For CONAPO, before its current candor, admitting a larger flow risked complicating the dialogue with the United States over illegal immigration and raised skepticism about Mexico's economic development and family planning policies. But the huge increases in the numbers of Mexican foreign-born and illegal immigrants apparent in the 2000 U.S. Census made previous modest estimates untenable.

For Washington, projecting such high numbers would have hit Americans concerned about immigration glut with more "sticker shock," fanning unwelcome demands for tighter border controls, and would have highlighted its own capitulation on border control and internal enforcement. While CONAPO has now owned up to the masses of the country's own workers voting against it with their feet, Census has so far given no indication of revising its own low projections of emigration even though they are refuted by the Bureau's own reckoning of the swelling of the Mexican foreign born to 8.8 million, and illegal Mexican immigrants jumping from one million to nearly four million in the decade.

What Happens After 2030 Under the New Assumptions?

Even while acknowledging substantially higher emigration, CONAPO still stands by the low variant assumptions about total Mexican population during the 2000-2050 period. It has Mexico's total fertility rate reaching the 2.1 replacement level by 2005 with total population topping out at 132.2 million, and the labor force shrinking after 2040. CONAPO's 2001 study does not project emigration beyond 2030, but the indications are that it will remain substantial through mid-century even if the growth of Mexico's population and labor force slows as foreseen.

More supportive of continued high emigration, however, are the projections of the Census Bureau's International Division and the U.N. Population

Table 3. Earlier Projections of Mexican Pop., Growth Rates, & Emigration, 1995-2050

	Pop. (Millions)		Pop. Growth Rate		Emigrants (Thousands)		
Year	Census	CONAPO	Census	CONAPO	Census	CONAPO	Labor Force (Millions)
1995	92.49	91.99	1.9 %	1.73 %	(1996) 283	294	38.64
2000	100.35	99.58	1.8 %	1.44 %	281	299	43.30
2010	114.99	112.23	1.4 %	0.99 %	265	314	54.61
2020	128.00	122.11	1.1 %	0.70 %	243	293	63.53
2030	139.13	128.93	0.9 %	0.39 %	223	258	68.87
2040	147.66	132.18	0.6 %	0.11 %	192	225	70.55
2050	153.16	131.58	0.4 %	- 0.20 %	169	197	68.81
Pct. Change 2000-2030	65.60 %	43.00 %	- 78.9 %	- 101.20 %	- 40.3 %	- 33 %	78.1

Sources: U.S. Census Data from Bureau of the Census, International Population Center, 2000. CONAPO data from La Poblacion de Mexico: Situacion Actual y Desafinos Fururos, 2000. Labor force data from www.conapo.gob.mx/m_en_cifras/imagenes/wpc21.gif.

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Division. Both agencies assume in their projections that Mexico will not reach replacement fertility until 2020 at the earliest, 15 years later than as is foreseen by Mexico. (See Table 3 — U.N. projections not shown) They project Mexico's population significantly higher than does CONAPO in the period between 2030 and 2050. Census projects Mexico's mid-century population at 153.6 million and still growing by 0.4 percent annually. The U.N. has Mexico still growing in 2050 at 0.25 percent annually, and a total population of 146.7 million.

Pre-2001 CONAPO and U.S. Census projections of emigration for 2000 through 2050 (Table 3), applied to CONAPO's latest estimates of emigration (Table 1), permit estimates of a range of possible Mexican emigration outcomes by 2050. Both Census and CONAPO in their earlier estimates agree that Mexican emigration will decline between 2030 and 2050, though not at identical rates. The decadal percentage of decline in those two sets of emigration rates then can be used to extrapolate from CONAPO's 2000-2030 estimates (Table 4).

Even though all these projections and variants show Mexican emigration as diminishing after 2030, all projections show a prospective exodus of Mexican workers during this half-century that is prodigious by any calculations. The migration numbers projected in Table 4 and Table 1 permit estimates of total Mexican out-migration to the United States by mid-century of up to 22.6 million in the worst case, 11 to 12 million of which would enter illegally, assuming U.S. immigration rules stay as they are.

More troubling is that even a Mexico of rising wages and prosperity and lower demand for its workers in the United States will still export over 18.5 million people northward by mid-century. The outcome depends a lot on Mexico's actual population size during this half century. Will it be close to CONAPO's preferred low variant? Or will it be more like the Census and UN projections by 2050, 21.6 million persons higher and still growing?

Why Release This Study Now?

The timing of this CONAPO study suggests that it is more a political brief than a detached demographic investigation. Its release in late 2001 seems timed to bolster Mexican efforts to keep alive the negotiations with the Bush administration on regularizing Mexican workers in the United States. Its major message and warning is that Mexican emigration to the United States — quite a lot of it — will inevitably continue for the foreseeable future in response to immutable social and economic forces in both countries. So, this fact must

Table 4. Five Scenarios: Annual Mexican Emigration to the U.S., 2030-50 (Thou.)

	2001 Extrapolated (CONAPO)				
Year	Scenario A	Scenario B	Scenario D (worst case)	Extrapolated Decline of Migration Rate 2040-50	2000 Decline Rates Extrapolated (Census) Scenario X
2030	397	503	514.3	-	473
2040	337	428	437.0	- 15.0 %	428
2050	297	377	386.0	- 11.8 %	392
Total Emigration 2000-2050 (Millions)	18.58	22.14	22.6	-	20.78

Column 4: Rate of decline of Mexican emigration 2030-50 implied in CONAPO's pre-2001 projection of net immigration 1995-2050 (Table 3)

Columns 1-3: Applies rates of emigration decline in Column 4 to 2030 emigration projected in three scenarios of 2001 CONAPO studies (Table 1)

Column 5: Applies Census Bureau's projected 2030-50 rate of decline of net emigration to the 2030 migration projection in CONAPO's "constant emigration" Scenario X. Census' projected rate of decline is 9.5 percent in 2030-40 and 8.4 percent in 2040-50.

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be recognized and dealt with bilaterally. As CONAPO's report puts it:

> *The migratory phenomenon between Mexico and the United States must be seen as structural and permanent in the bilateral relationship. Diverse factors such as geographical proximity, asymmetry and growing economic integration, and the intense relations and interchanges between both countries make the creation of migratory flows inevitable . . .The migration has costs for both sides that can only be addressed by working in a spirit of cooperation and mutual collaboration and in recognition of common benefits. . . . Building walls or using law enforcement or repressive measures, or stronger unilateral steps won't work to adequately regulate the flow of migratory labor between both countries.*[4]

At the same time, CONAPO's study holds out some assurance that the "inevitable" migration won't last forever. Mexico's 1973 commitment to encourage family planning will make itself felt dramatically during the next three decades and a smaller Mexico is on the way before mid-century. At that time Mexico itself will be experiencing the problems of a slow-growing labor force and an aging population.

CONAPO's report is also an effort to promote once again the advantages of low-wage Mexican workers to the United States and to play down their fiscal and social costs to their host country. It rejects U.S. studies showing high fiscal costs as flawed in "concept, methodology, and technique" and claims that these reports undervalue the lifetime tax contribution of migrants.

Also rejected is the evidence of a fiscal drain at the U.S. state and local level, which CONAPO sees as a U.S. lack of proper distribution of national revenues. CONAPO cherry picks for support the 1997 National Research Council report on immigration, which recognizes that migrants' fiscal costs, such as education, are really an "investment" in U.S. national welfare. CONAPO finds studies showing Mexican immigrants having problems in adapting and assimilating to U.S. life are "inconclusive" and lacking in evidence. Even so, CONAPO calls for more U.S. federal and state attention to "proactive policies" to integrate immigrants.

Studies showing wage depression by low-wage foreign workers are similarly dismissed or used selectively to show that wage depression is mostly borne by the migrants themselves. This is as close at CONAPO comes to recognizing that low-skill Mexican workers already in abundance in low-skill sectors of the United States will be harmed by even higher mass migration of their countrymen in the coming decades.

Can the Mexican Exodus Rejuvenate an Aging America?

Mexican migration, the report boasts, is a timely remedy for the aging of the U.S. labor force and the accompanying labor shortages. It cites such prestigious allies as Alan Greenspan and the AFL-CIO for its position. And it cites unspecified "available" studies showing that the migrants and their descendants will help pay the Social Security benefits of aging Americans and postpone the onset of insolvency in the Social Security system, now expected about 2036.

Yet the report is blind to its own findings that bear on Mexican migrants' potential to enrich the U.S. Social Security fund. Mexican workers in the United States now have high poverty rates, low earnings, and higher probability of employment in the (non-taxpaying) informal economy. Those conditions will only be worsened by the annual addition of 300,000 to 400, 000 low-skill Mexican workers during the next five decades. These cohorts are hardly a promising tax base for rescuing the Social Security fund.

Because of a rapid fall-off in fertility, the Mexican population in Mexico and in the United States will itself be aging rapidly at the time Social Security will be hardest pressed. In 2030, 13.2 percent of the Mexican population will 65 or older, about the percentage of Americans now. By 2040, nearly one in five Mexicans will be 65 or older, rising to one in four by 2050, while the proportions in their prime working years will shrink. The United States will be receiving its future migrants from a rapidly aging pool of workers. Those workers will have shorter working lives in the United States and fewer years of contributing to the Social Security fund, while the numbers drawing on it will rise rapidly, and receive higher returns relative to their U.S. lifetime earnings if Social Security maintains its progressive payout policy.

Questions for Future U.S.-Mexican Migration Relations

If CONAPO is to be believed, somewhere between 18 million and 23 million Mexicans will migrate to the United States in this half century, and neither the United States nor Mexico can do much about it, even

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if they want to, though CONAPO offers no evidence for its assertion of migration's inevitability. This is a strange, even dismaying portrayal of reality for a government to release on the eve of what it hopes will be a total renegotiation of the relationship with the United States on Mexican migration.

Mexico apparently hopes for an amnesty of its 3.0-3.7 million unlawful immigrants now in the United States and a still undefined program to allow future illegal aliens to enter and work lawfully in the United States. U.S. acceptance of all who are projected to come would impair Mexico's own labor market and would compel the U.S. federal government and the states to more carefully regulate low-skill labor conditions to curb mass displacement, wage depression, and abuses of wage and hour laws. The United States is unwilling or unable to provide full protection as it is.

Opening the door to masses of Mexican workers would make Mexican citizenship and ID documents a highly desirable commodity to millions of the restless and underemployed elsewhere in the world. The massive fraud that resulted from the 1987 Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) amnesty is a warning. There, a leniently adjudicated admissions scheme, administered by pro-immigrant agencies applying loosely defined qualifications and weak ID standards, opened the door to nearly a million ineligible migrants.

And if the United States accepts as legal guest workers only a portion of Mexico's intending emigrants, its migrant worker program would face the same contradictions that undermined the binational Bracero agreements of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Illegal workers continued to come along with the legally admitted ones, undercutting legal workers' labor standards and bargaining power with employers.

Mexico has hinted that it could help the United States in limiting migration outside the agreement. But how much could it or would it do if it truly believes that the high migration flow is "inevitable" and not manageable by law enforcement methods? Indeed, Mexico continues to stress that its citizens have a constitutional right to travel beyond their borders and that it would never coerce them to give up this right.

CONAPO's report of future migration is both a warning to the United States and a lure to the American business and employer class. The situation it outlines gives Mexico a strong bargaining position in the coming dialogue over migrant workers. Mexico, with the help of its growing phalanx of Mexican-American voters, may indeed win amnesty and regularization for millions of its citizens here, while taking no responsibility for the many that would continue to come illegally — with the encouragement of American employers. If negotiations fail, Mexico is no worse off than before: its Mexican-American, business, and church allies would continue to block any serious interdiction of the millions of migrants who intend to come, and its political presence in the United States would continue to grow accordingly.

End Notes

[1] Consejo Nacional de Poblacion, Direccion de Communicacion Social: *Migration Mexico-Estados Unidos 2001,* November 2001 (summary and full report).

[2] Census population projections NP-01-A, january 13, 2000, middle series, projects Hispanic population in the United States in 2030 at 68.2 million. Author assumes Mexican proportion of total Hispanic population will grow because of higher fertility of Mexican women among Latino groups (TFR 3.3 in 2000). This estimate uses CONAPO's estimate of a 60 percent Mexican share of the U.S. Hispanic population.

[3] www.conapo.gob.mx/m_en_cifras/principal.html; February 19, 2002.

[4] *Migracion Mexico-Estados Unidos 2001* (full report); pages 1-2.

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